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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a field linguist's personal observations on language work and the language effort in Alaskan Athabaskan languages. Language work is the various ways in which people can make real accomplishments in one of the smaller languages for the benefit of themselves and the people around them, and for the benefit of the larger society. Language effort is used in a broader sense to mean the various ways in which work with the Native language involves participation by people from the local language/ethnic community as well as nonmembers. The Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska has increased public awareness of the locations and viability of Athabaskan languages. Participation in the language effort has been limited mainly to a small group of writers and expert elderly speakers. Bilingual programs in Athabaskan languages in Alaskan schools were inadequately supported and short-lived. The author's field work with Athabaskan languages involves translating narratives by native storytellers, and developing a dictionary. Recommendations for enhancing the language effort in Alaska include: (1) fostering the community development potential of the language effort; (2) training and employing more people in the actual methods and skills of language work; and (3) developing new teaching venues and methods. Productive language work must adhere to rigorous standards of accuracy through a variety of projects. Language work can be enhanced through systematic filing of data and use of computers for teaching and learning. (KS)

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On the Language Effort and Work in Alaskan Athabaskan Languages

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1. Introduction: Perspective on the language effort

In the 1990s with the passing of many expert speakers in the Alaskan languages, there is much discussion about Native language issues. Work with the languages and the speakers is increasingly visible and demanding. Reverance and concern for the Athabaskan languages was repeatedly expressed last May at the Denaakenaaga Elders Conference at Tanacross. Two bills, one federal and one state, have been proposed which may create more support for work on the Alaska Native languages.

I now have about twenty years of experience as a field linguist in various Athabaskan languages. Every week I discuss with members of Athabaskan language/ethnic communities language projects and some of the methods and skills that are necessary to do these projects. I find that I am often summarizing the recent history of language work in Alaska. There is a need to be realistic about what has and has not been accomplished with Athabaskan languages in Alaska since the 1970s. To clarify these discussions I have been assembling a collection of personal observations on language work and the language effort in Alaskan Athabaskan languages.

I use the term language work to mean the various ways in which people can make real accomplishments in one of the smaller languages for the benefit of themselves and the people around them, and for the benefit of the larger society. Language work can happen in a "vernacular" or spontaneous way in the course of language use by people who treasure the language. Language work can be an expert displaying her/his expertise to an interested learner, or a speaker or non-speaker expanding his/her knowledge of a vocabulary domain or an idiomatic expression, or a novice learning how to pronounce words correctly. We have to be imaginative, realistic, and disciplined for language work to gain momentum and to show results. A person's interest in a language can be shaped by a mixture of personal initiative and academic and technical skills.

I use the term language effort in a broader sense to mean the various ways in which work with the Native language involves participation by people from the local language/ethnic community (speakers or non-speakers) as well as non-members (e.g., via interest in local people, history or language; or the development of various levels of academic work on the language or culture; or the evidence of political support for specific aspects of the

language effort.) A language effort takes place not so much in a program in a building as in the minds of the participants.

2. Some observations

Work with Athabaskan languages is challenging. These languages are considered to be among the most difficult in the world to speak and to analyze. Work in the communities requires awareness of the traditional culture and of current social concerns. What follows are some of my observations on Athabaskan work in Alaska over the past twenty or so years.

a) The Alaska Native Language Center was established at the University of Alaska in 1972 as a center for the research and documentation on the Native languages of Alaska. Due to ANLC's efforts there has been increased public awareness of the locations and viability of Athabaskan (and other) Alaskan Native languages. Basic research took place in eleven Alaskan Athabaskn languages and numerous publications in local langauges appeared. The work with speakers or Native language writers, as it has resulted in public awareness and publications, has had symbolic importance.

b) Participation in the language effort has been limited mainly to a small group of writers and expert elderly speakers. There have been very few job opportunities in Alaskan Athabaskan languages. Linguistic support and research in the languages has been uneven mainly because there has been a very small number of experienced linguists working in Alaskan Athabaskan. Very few persons have attained technical training in Athabaskan linguistics in Alaska, and the university-level course work in Athabaskan is very fragmentary. There has been no involvement of speakers of Alaskan languages in theoretical linguistics, an approach that was advocated by some prominent linguists in the 1970s. In fact, this approach would be pretentious and inappropriate for the Alaskan situation.

c) The first bilingual programs in Athabaskan languages in Alaskan schools were inadequately funded and supported and for the most part were short-lived. School districts have not been able to provide technical support for language programs.

d) In my view the public discourse on Alaska Native languages has been too centralized and one-sided. There has been an emphasis on imperiled languages, on numbers of speakers and their ages, and on imminent cultural loss. This message has been accompanied by vague exhortations to use and retain the languages but very little in the way of concrete ideas or opportunities to participate in actual language work. In my view, this monologic emphasis on language loss became demoralizing and counter-productive to the language effort in Alaskan Athabaskan. Certainly, there has been far too little dialogue on language issues between the Athabaskan communities, Native organizations, and specialists in the Athabaskan languages.

e) It is relevant to note that the Native language effort in the neighboring Yukon Territory of Canada has a different

character. The Yukon Native Language Centre in Whitehorse, which is under the direction of the Council for Yukon Indians, has created jobs and a three-year training program for language specialists and teachers throughout the YT. Over thirty Native language specialists have completed this program. The central theme of the YNLC approach has been a well-organized teaching program in the Native languages. There are a number of successful oral language programs in Yukon communities. In addition, on the Canadian side there are jobs and funded projects in fields such as medical and court interpretation, and journalism. In the Yukon Territory there is a relatively optimistic spirit about the language effort.

3. The dynamics of field work

I make a distinction between talking about Native language issues and actually participating in work on one of the languages. One generalization I make for the period 1973-1990 in Alaska, is that there has been a contradiction between, on the one hand, the dynamics of my field work with Athabaskan speakers, and on the other hand, the dynamics of the broader language effort by members of the language/ethnic community.

It is in my field work with Athabaskan languages where I have seen concrete results. This language work is a blend of the academic and the non-academic. I continually find keen interest in the language documentation I do with speakers. The dictionary work on detailed local knowledge and the translation of narratives by the strong storytellers are intellectually stimulating activities for all who are involved. I mainly work on a one-to-one or small group basis. We develop projects mutually. The ANLC publications program is an important stimulus to the work. Language consultants are paid on an hourly basis. The work takes shape through stages of getting acquainted, establishing goals, and transmitting factual information through the language. The speaker and the linguist alternate between teaching and learning. As intellectual skills and factual information develop, new language materials are created.

Language work can take place in the smallest of language communities, even with the last speaker of a language. A spirit of team effort can be fostered amongst a network of speakers and non-speakers. Quite often, the work with the language becomes a positive and therapeutic activity for the participants. It seems to me that the techniques and dynamics of this kind of language work can be catalogued so that this process can be imparted to others.

4. Some ideas for future work

I think of language work in terms of individuals: in the goals and aspirations of individuals, and the skills that individuals need in order to participate in the work. If language work is perceived to be centralized and controlled by an elite

group, individuals will tend not to participate. My ideas for enhancing the language effort in Alaskan Athabaskan languages include: 1) fostering the community development potential of the language effort; 2) training and employing more persons in the actual methods and skills of language work; and 3) developing new teaching venues and methods.

I feel that there is need for an "expandable" discussion and review of Native language issues and linguistic resources in Alaska with all interested groups. Many issues merit discussion: new ideas for potential language activities, economic issues such as funding for a wide range jobs in language work, the delivery of technical training in language work skills, etc.

There are many factors which make for productive language work. Some of my guidelines for work in the languages are listed herewith.

1) There must be rigorous standards of accuracy in writing, translating and researching of the language. Speakers and learners demand high standards. The time and experience required to attain these standards should not be underestimated, especially with languages as difficult to speak and to analyze as Athabaskan.

2) There should be an interesting mixture of projects, some of which can be completed and delivered rapidly, others which can be completed in the forseeable short-term future, and others which are seen as long-term projects. There must be visible results for the language effort to sustain any momentum. A diverse array of projects might include development of teaching materials; work on topical vocabulary (place names, clothing, etc.); investigation and presentation of the grammar, and work with various types of narratives.

3) Work with speakers must move along and advance from session to session. Regular and systematic filing of the linguistic data is essential for the work with speakers to be cumulative. It is not enough to make tapes or to accumulate notes without keeping up with filing. Filing of language data is a technical skill which can be very rewarding. It is learned through experience. A filing system should embrace morphemes, words, stories, tapes, books, and other documents on the language.

4) Work with narratives (stories, songs is the cornerstone of a language effort that reflects local knowledge and traditions. The strongest endorsement of the language work comes when a prominent storyteller, historian, or philosopher contributes stories and ideas in the highest, most complex register of his/her language.

5) With computers and software it is possible to produce attractive materials fairly rapidly and to develop overlap in projects. It is possible to use a computer in field sessions to greatly accelerate the documentary process. Advances in the computer technology will no doubt continue to enhance both the research, the teaching and the learning of the languages.

6) Persons with talent for language work can be encouraged

both informally and formally. Training in language work can take places simply by participating in the work. However in Alaska there is a need for formalized training at all levels--basic literacy in the languages, intermediate level courses on research and teaching methods, and course work in advanced linguistic and folkloristic work. There is a need for language fellowships and apprenticeships, as well as entry-level jobs for specialists in practical language work as well as special positions for elders. The University of Alaska should develop and consolidate the course work and degree programs which can attract and train persons in language work. One step is the recently proposed Associate of Arts degree in Native languages which will be offered jointly by Yukon College and the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

7) A variety of venues and methods for teaching the Native languages needs to be explored. The Native language should be taught in the public schools but it should not be confined to the schools alone. Complementary venues should available: homes, the community centers in villages as well as larger towns and cities; camps and historic sites (such as the camp at Old Minto); and the various branches of the university system. There is potential for small group and individualized learning through computerized multi-media courses. Other options include language nests for younger children, evening programs in the community for mixed generations, structured instruction with computerized learning, self-learning with graded cassette courses, self-learning through with memorization techniques, and language courses delivered over satellite. Other projects might be the transcription and teaching of songs (traditional and non-traditional); the blending of the teaching of language with Athabaskan life skills (basketry, fishing, winter camping, etc.); or the use of language in original dramas or screenplays. (Can someone write an Athabaskan "Dances With Wolves"?). The poetic and historic aspects of Athabaskan narratives can be taught with the use of bilingual texts. Creative writing can be encouraged in the teaching of Athabaskan literacy.

8) Expectations for Athabaskan language work need to be tailored to the language situation. In areas where the language is spoken by middle-age and older generations, there are more options for language activities. In the areas where the language is virtually extinct, realistic language goals need to be set; e.g the memorization of place names. There should be sensitive awareness of the pyschological barriers many Natives face toward their language. At some point there should be frank discussion of "language emotions" such as guilt, shyness, resentment, or defeatism. It seems that the interest in Alaska in community wellness and sobriety invites some new ways for the language to be used and taught.

9) For Athabaskans with traditional training the language is the culture. Healing, praying, counselling, and poetry are expressed in the language. The "language vows" that have been made by the people in the Yukon territory programs are language

prayers for cultural transmission. Of course many people have no direct experience with the religious-philosophical dimension of Athabaskan culture. Nevertheless the language program should strive for an appreciation of a profound culture.

In summary, there are many positive benefits in language work both for an individual or for a language/ethnic community. If people are concerned about the future of Athabaskan in Alaska, then
they should be openly discussing how to perpetuate what is most precious.